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CARL SPITTELER, POET-CITIZEN

BY F. V. KEYS

A TALL figure, of dignified bearing; a noble head; a physiognomy in which humor and irony have traced their lines, but which is first and last that of the thinker and which only now, after seventy years of living, has achieved its distinctive beauty: such was Carl Spitteler, as he rose to acknowledge the tributes paid him at the banquet given in his honor at Geneva in the autumn of 1915. Striking as he was to the eye, the individual confronting so quietly the tumultuous plaudits impressed one mainly by his personality, one that coupled strength with sensibility, in which fortitude and gentleness had grown into the benignant humanity of a slow-maturing nature, whose roots had struck deep.

The applause endured; it would not end. It was a unique gathering, at once intimate and brilliant, where the genius of a nation was met to do homage to the greatest among them. Hodler and Jaques-Dalcroze were there, and other returned sons from over the French border. The note of a spiritual homecoming was in the air, the deep throb with which grown men recur to old currents of feeling, to those first things which are also last things. From the frescoed walls of the hall of the Arquebuse old heroes of the people, and their eternal allies, the Great Mountains, seemed to share in the stirring of all that was most excellent and strong in the *pietas* of Switzerland, "venerable Mother and incorruptible Guardian of the freedom of nations," as the phrase ran in the tribute from the French League of the Rights of Man. For throughout the evening, letters and telegrams were coming in, from the simple message of a group of Swiss privates on guard at their mountain post on the frontier, to the eloquent homage of great universities, of poets and philosophers, from the French Academy, from the Sorbonne and the College de France, from Boutroux and Bergson, from Rostand, Maeterlinck, Verhaeren: all united in their tribute to the "high

and illustrious poet," and to the "passionate lover of truth and justice, the apostle of human dignity and independence." Small wonder that the applause endured, that it would not end! For none was there who did not feel, in the presence of Spitteler, a throb deeper, purer than even that which means love of poetry or of country, which is the response to one who has shown that greatness of soul which is one of the rarest prerogatives of humanity.

He began to speak, in French, with a Russian accent. Few words, and simple; the right words. Humorous irony played over strong emotion like a sunlit breeze that hides the depths of the pool whose surface it stirs. He exaggerated his aloofness, his ignorance of local interests, so that he might stress more strongly his sense of the generosity of his hosts who have offered to him, the stranger, the priceless gift of their sympathy; a gift for which he thanks them, as for happiness itself. Certain morose friends of his had expressed misgivings of a possible "political" coloring to this occasion. They probably meant "patriotic." "My whole so-called political career (which I do not regret) computes, out of a term of seventy years, precisely one hour and ten minutes. That hour, unique and exceptional, has no continuation, for I have nothing either to add or to retract." Possibly a certain act of his—merely the saying of something that needed to be said—may have commended him to them. If so, there is no harm in it. On the contrary,—“I congratulate myself on it. And I congratulate you.” But he prefers to see in this occasion neither politics, nor even patriotism, but rather something else: “the religious love, the profound regard, because inborn and traditional, of the Latin race for the beautiful and sublime: in its kind, for poetry.” They have come together in all disinterestedness, as to a love-feast. . . . Their precious amity he had neither thought of, nor solicited, nor expected. “It has been for me an immense and delicious surprise. . . . I beg you, *aimables Welches*, to keep your friendship for me to my end.”

Words not without their searching pathos, uttered by a man of seventy to compatriots who had only just found him, thanks to an act which, in the dark hour of perplexity, had liberated the moral impulses and precipitated the spiritual solidarity of his

nation. Words fraught moreover with a vast human significance, inasmuch as they were spoken by one whose mother-tongue was German to fellow-nationals whose mother-tongue was French; proving that even at that dark moment patriotism could maintain itself above the ignoble fetishism of so-called race, on the serene plane of the community of political ideals, preserved by centuries of common sacrifice, dearer to steadfast men than the ties of kin and language.

The award to Spitteler of the Nobel prize for poetry has now consummated the poetic justice so late vouchsafed him by his contemporaries. The future historian, if he also be a humanist, will recognize in this poet one of the most significant figures on the scene of this strange eventful century.

In an exquisite little book, published early in 1914, Spitteler has told the story of his first five years. In its rare blending of the impressions of maturity with those of the dawn of consciousness, it suggests comparison with the reminiscences lately published by Anatole France, in spite of the divergence of the Parisian scene from the Arcadian simplicity that surrounded the cradle of Spitteler with "abundance of grass, and of love." For him the little town of Liestal, capital of the half-canton Basel-land, where he was born April 24, 1845, and where his father held office as *statthalter*, meant the dark old brewery of his maternal grandfather, with its wonderful hillside at the back, its meadows, yards, and out-houses; the dwelling-house with its little-frequented inn-parlor, where his grandmother on the dark, stormy winter days spun for him the magic web of legend and fairy-tale, and where at noon the gigantic brewer, who could not speak softly even if he would, came trooping in to dinner with his trampling workmen from the vats. The extraordinary tenacity of memory which holds in pristine freshness the minute details of the picture is equaled only by the extent of its backward range: he recalls the vivid fluid dreams of his first year before they melted, as it seemed to him, into the fixed dream of the vast open-air theater to which the spectator brings something unalterable,—

Call it soul, or the Me, or what you like—*X* for aught I care—that is independent of the changes in the body, that is unconcerned with the condition of the brain or the grasp of the intellect, that does not grow, nor develop,

because from the beginning it was finished and complete; something that dwells already in the child at the breast and remains identical throughout life. It can even speak, this *X*, though only softly. It says, if I rightly interpret its foreign dialect: "we come from far off."

It is this something that never changes that has preserved all the bright clear picture of external things, as well as the mysterious inner world all saturated with the mood of the child: a world where passes the fragrance of human affections, revealing the loveliness of a wrinkled face, touching the evening hour and the joyous ritual of bedtime with indescribable happiness, lending its soft melody to the curfew bell. It is a world of intense subjective emotions, where one tastes sheer bliss, or looks into the face of night and sees glimmering through it the features of Medusa, of something that has naught to do with man, his cheerful hopes, his security and loves. Nothing in this world is trifling, save as wisdom and maturity see that trifles are the supreme things in life. But above all, this inner world is one where Nature reigns supreme, a presence enfolding and enhancing all others, calling its subtle message to one from a hillside, from the walls of a narrow street, sliding down the changing light, caught in the crystal tone of water falling in the shade. These visitings of natural magic he keeps to himself, as a secret of which he half fancies he should be ashamed; until, on a momentous drive to Berne, passing over a shady bridge under a peculiar spell of atmosphere, an exclamation from his mother discovers to him that she shares with him the ineffable sense of the genius of the place. The day becomes a series of enchanted beauties of forest, mountain glen, and dazzling sunlit towns; of infinite spaces overhung with shifting lights and gauzy vapors, revealing the twin spells of height and distance. From that day on, the poet says, "I looked at the visible world through my mother's eyes." He had just completed his third year. *My Earliest Experiences* closes with the removal of the family to Berne, two years later, the elder Spitteler having accepted a post in the Federal government. Liestal, and the stretch of country about it with its delicate hint of the Savoyard South, became the object of an incurable homesickness, and aching regret. Thought and feeling were rooted in the native countryside, *das Gefilde*. Almost from the

beginning, Spitteler observes, his feeling for Nature was identical with his feeling for home. Nothing is more fortunate, he adds, than this conjunction. It is true. Human presences withdraw, and the hearth is desolate; but the earth and sky remain, and their voices are never silenced.

For the years that followed we have only annals, of classical schooling at Berne and Basle, of studies in law and theology at Basle and Zurich and Heidelberg. The seeds of genius slept deep beneath the activities of healthy boyhood, and forward adolescence and youth. His first artistic impulse led him toward drawing, and in the same year, his seventeenth, toward music. No adequate teachers were available to develop fully either bent. Music, in particular that of Bach, remained a permanent inspiration. His first intimate friendship, with Josef Viktor Widmann, brought him the stimulus of a congenial mind. About this time he was oppressed by periods of melancholy, when he labored under an intolerable sense of the suffering imposed on sentient beings, above all, on dumb creatures. The features of Medusa no longer only glimmered through the dusk; they offered their stony horror to the day. Meantime, he began to grope toward poetry. Highly characteristic is the fact that his record is absolutely clear of subjective lyric effusions. For nearly three years his mind was busy with a drama on the subject of Saul, of which not a line was written down. Cosmic visions, borrowing the shapes of Greek myth and Hebrew story, were carried with him to Heidelberg, after a translation of Ariosto, which had fallen into his hands at Zurich, had sealed his determination and revealed his calling, to become an epic poet.

The year following his term at Heidelberg, 1869, Spitteler has referred to as the zenith of his creative and emotional experience. Purely subjective, as yet: a torrent of glancing visions, sweeping clear of local habitation and a name.

A sudden end came to this happy moment, and stopped the flow of what he has called the "sunlit spring." The examining board of Liestal rejected Spitteler, as a candidate in theology, on the grounds of questionable orthodoxy and alleged lack of preparation. He met this rebuff by putting all else aside for assiduous study, and in 1871 passed with the highest honors the theo-

logical examination at Basle. He was nominated to the pastorate of Arosa, but refused it and left for Russia, where he became tutor in the family of a Russian general.

His exile—if such it was—lasted eight years. Nothing is known of this period. When he returned to join his mother on the death of his father in 1879, he brought with him the first part of the work which he published at the close of 1880, under the title *Prometheus and Epimetheus, a Parable*. The second part followed a year later. They bore the significant signature, Felix Tandem.

This first-fruit of his genius, conceived thirteen years earlier, upon the reception of which hung his hope of literature as a career, was still-born, so far as critics or public were concerned. It flouted equally the sentimental and conventional prepossessions of the older school of “idealists,” and the dogmas of the young realists. In Switzerland, it was noticed in print only by Spitteler’s friend Widmann. The German press contented itself with re-printing, in a weekly sheet, Widmann’s article. Over against this neglect of the purveyors of literary opinion, one remarks that Nietzsche, upon reading the work, observed that Spitteler was “perhaps the most distinguished aesthetic writer among the Germans”; that the veteran Gottfried Keller, while doubting whether it was a time for such “sibylline books,” found the composition “full of the choicest beauties from beginning to end,” and one to which he should return again and again. Burckhardt, the painter Boecklin—with whose genius that of Spitteler has certain notable affinities—and the musician Brahms, also extended recognition.

What, indeed, could “the critics” make of the work, or say of it? There was no contemporary peg upon which it could possibly be hung, no pattern for comparison, no clue to its “points.” Nietzsche speaks somewhere of the dangerous fascination of looking down into the dark shaft of one’s being. The *Prometheus* is full of the perilous stuff that is gleaned from a scrutiny of that perspective. It is the outgrowth of an intense personal experience, of a human soul absorbed in the challenge of the infamies, and in delight in the beauty, of the universe. Prometheus’s is the soul that is true to itself, that scorns convention not for the

easier but for the thornier way, whose renunciations cut at the very roots of human affections and hopes, yet whose nobler humanity in the end rescues his people, restores their moral sense, and reconciles him to his fallen brother Epimetheus. It is indeed a book to return to, to keep by one. It contains an immense wealth of episode; it abounds in amazing contrasts, both of mood and scene; it is a veritable mine of invention, yet the interest of the fable is always subordinate to the imaginative dealing with character and scenery. Were it not, indeed, for the pervasive and as it were irresistible delight in nature, the weight of woe that this work carries, and which is curiously burdened by the rhythmical iambic prose, would be almost intolerable. There is humor, but it is for the most part too grim to afford relief. The sense for natural beauties, however, everywhere breaks through and sows the foul and waste places with spots of pure and fresh delight: it is subtly allied to the loyalty that sustains Prometheus, a loyalty to something as inexplicable but as enduring as Nature herself. Soul no less than sense finds there her home.

The failure of this work to obtain recognition turned Spitteler into the inevitable path of teaching, first in a girls' school in Berne, of which his friend Widmann was director, and then in the high school of Neuveville, where he taught Greek and Latin in the French tongue, and where, one of his pupils tells us, he impressed the boys with something spacious and easy in his spirit, in the nonchalant rocking of his high shoulders as he passed down the street, something which they fancied he had caught from the vast Russian background. It was probably in Russia that he laid the foundation of his extensive and intimate acquaintance with French literature, an influence that undoubtedly has made for the delightfully perspicuous and graceful style of his later prose. Slowly, with dogged determination, he resumed composition. But the professional drudgery of this period and of the succeeding years of journalistic labors at Basle and Zurich permitted only the lighter side of his poetic gift to find expression, in three small volumes of verse, while the continued challenge of the apes of Apollo dictated the humorous satire of the *Literary Allegories*.

In 1891 release came. A legacy made him financially inde-

pendent, and he retired to Lucerne with his wife, a native of Holland who had been his pupil at Berne, and his two daughters. There, in the seclusion of his garden on the banks of the lovely lake of Lucerne, he at length was free to dedicate himself to the high epic Muse. Had freedom come too late? For a time, it looked so. For the decade that followed, there appeared some prose tales, and a novel, *Imago*, a singular work which bears more the stamp of nature than of art, in which one may catch the reflection of what confronted the Spitteler of thirty-four on his return from Russia to the straiter Swiss circle. Not until the new century had dawned did his stubborn faith in his epic star find justification. Then the full current of his genius, which had so long been gathering in its underground flow, broke through and declared itself in the splendid poetic achievement of the *Olympischer Frühling*. The first version appeared in 1900-1904. The enlarged and revised edition was printed in 1909.

At once the work placed Spitteler in the forefront of living poets, and challenged comparison, by reason of its essentially modern spirit, with the great epic creations of the Renaissance and of Antiquity. While ostensibly chronicling the advent of Zeus upon the fall of Chronos, the *Olympian Spring* presents the young gods moving and acting in a setting of Alpine beauty, reflected in all the radiant hues of poesy, in ways that embody the timeless attributes of the race. Classic and modern features are mingled with equal daring and felicity, while inner and outer events are presented with a plasticity unparalleled in modern poetry. A splendor rests on everything; there is an imaginative zest in the movement of the poem that inevitably recalls the spirit of the mountain climber exulting in sure-footed strength amid the eternal snows strewn against the sky. The experience that dogged the footsteps of Prometheus with tragedy, is now mastered, and has become the substance of pure contemplation, even while, between the coming and going of god and hero, one hears the many voices of the restless modern spirit, its intellectual and ethical question, its social challenge, its obstinate scepticism, its vague deep faith in life. Everywhere, the matured genius of the poet is present, composing, placing all the elements of a rich imagination with sureness, delicacy, and an admirable simplicity.

A circle of distinguished admirers speedily formed itself in Germany. A chance quotation fell under the notice of the distinguished conductor and composer, Felix Weingartner; he procured the work, and wrote a monograph to bring it to the attention of the cultured public. He pointed out that the ideals embodied in Spitteler's work, "opposing much that at the moment is accepted as culture and progress," set a limit to the possible extent of its popularity. But of "this man and artist . . . who has wrestled, in honesty and solitude, with his genius, until at last he has shaped in its completeness the hovering vision," Weingartner predicted: "the world will find Carl Spitteler."

The world has found Carl Spitteler. Not on the path that winds remote about the summit of the Parnassian Mount. But suddenly, it met him, the retired and solitary singer of his own song, in the press of the highroad of life, at the hour of terrible physical menace and moral confusion. Then he stepped forth from his retirement and spoke the word which, as he put it simply, needed to be spoken. It was a word for which his whole life, his absolute self-reliance, his unbroken integrity as a poet, had been the preparation and the authority.

It is difficult to-day, happily, to evoke the mental state that prevailed in the small neutral nations when confronted suddenly with the German dream of world dominion, and with the fate of Belgium. In Switzerland, moreover, the attractive force of the two great nations to the north subjected the unity of the French and the German Swiss to a terrific strain. For a moment, the fate of the Confederation seemed to lie in the hand of Germany. The German-Swiss cantons, numbering nearly two-thirds of the total population of less than four million, was riddled with "peaceful penetration," which sought to exploit illegitimately the innumerable legitimate bonds between groups politically distinct but one in speech and in many cultural traditions. The same condition existed, though less acute, in Holland and in Scandinavia. It was among the intellectuals of these countries, the presumable leaders of public opinion, that Germany's credit in science and education stood highest. As Germany's engine of violence rolled over Belgium with the momentum as of a natural law, the adumbration of a new Europe in the solid grip of a

masterful, superbly organized race, dazzled some eyes with its effulgence, and dimmed the vision of others with fear. Nowhere was there a voice of authoritative protest from a neutral nation, while here and there individuals once associated with liberalism staggered credulity by appearing as apologists of successful violence. Among the neutral peoples the sense of moral confusion, of moral impotence, became stifling, intolerable.

Then Switzerland spoke.

In quiet tones of convincing assurance, in such words as one who feels his judgment is of years might address to his neighbors, Spitteler, speaking before the New Helvetic Society in the December of that fateful year, took up the matter which all his compatriots knew but dreaded to admit: the widening gap between the Latin and the German elements of the nation. The motive of the whole discourse was one of clarification, carried out with a sureness and delicacy that lift the argument out of the class of occasional into the category of permanent political literature. To his countrymen, laboring under the strain of conflicting sympathies and the irritation of profound moral *malaise*, he unraveled, one by one, the threads of the complex problem; clarifying the national and the personal issues, orienting the one in the Swiss direction, the other by the compass of an invincible incorruptibility. And in the presence of the mighty neighbor whose ear was strained to catch the faintest murmur of disapproval, he repudiated, now with the happiest humor, again with words that stung like whips, what was criminal and ignoble in Germany's attempts upon the integrity, territorial and moral, of her opponents and of the neutral nations.

The short address is a classic. It reflects the essentials of the poet's character, it is impregnated with his human sympathy, with his unique Swiss humor, with his philosophy which sets in moving contrast the majestic human virtues and the piteous lot of men in the grip of destiny. The intellectual acumen in the handling of the complex problem, the moderation of tone, the firmness of the moral judgments, these are qualities so admirable and in the circumstances so amazing, that one recognizes in *Our Swiss Standpoint* a contribution to a sphere of literature invaded only by the greatest spirits, on the rarest occasions. English

readers will think of another epic poet who, when the time came, exposed the baseness of his own political friends in the interest of truth and freedom; and they will recall the noble sonnet of Wordsworth on the two immemorial voices of Liberty, the Mountains and the Sea.

The address was printed, and, translated into French, rapidly passed beyond the border. Its effect in Switzerland was immense, to the infinite surprise of the author. His name as a patriot became familiar to thousands who would never know him as poet. He himself has said: "The heart has its own intelligence, which is worth all that of the head." All honest minds could grasp the significance of this man who quietly put aside the honors and friendship of a lifetime, because he loved honor and was the friend of truth.

Spitteler's seventieth birthday, occurring in the April following, was made the occasion of a great manifestation of public esteem. Federal and cantonal officials, literary and artistic societies, student bodies and professors, rivalled in honoring him. When, in her turn, Geneva welcomed Spitteler, the general sense had grown, among the discerning, that Spitteler's action was essentially poetic in its nature, the inevitable outcome of his artistic conscience. It was the message of Verhaeren that best expressed the feeling of the gathering for one whose unfaltering Promethean faith had issued triumphant from a long ordeal, who had performed a difficult duty so simply because all his life he had preferred the high and difficult thing. "More than any of us," wrote the Belgian poet,

he has shown himself clear-sighted and courageous, disinterested and impartial. He appeared like a serene hero in the midst of the battle of hatreds. He attained to truth through himself, and proclaimed it as soon as he perceived it. I infinitely admire his attitude, and I love to persuade myself that it is the lucid Muses whom he has loved from long since who have composed for him his beautiful and rare conscience.

F. V. KEYS.